God's Search for Man November 29, 1964 Communion
Luke 19:1-10, Genesis 12:1-9

The two passages of scripture I read this morning share a common motif. One from the Old Testament, a story that was transmitted from generation to generation, the other from the New Testament, an incident from the life of Jesus. One tells a story that is 4,000 years old: the other an incident that occurred 2,000 years later. One took place on the very edge of recorded history: the other in the relatively sophisticated atmosphere of the Roman Empire. At first glance, it might seem that the two men, Abram, father of Israel; and Zachaeus, a first century tax collector, have little, if anything, in common. But, by way of introduction, I want to ~~suggest~~ say that the separate Biblical accounts of these two men, express the same thought; and furthermore, that they express the central thought of the Bible. I would go even further and suggest that ~~the thought~~ what is expressed in the two stories is the most important ~~thought~~ idea for all history, for all humanity. And that the two historical personalities; Abram, the wandering Semite, and Zacheus, a hated Jewish Publican, are by far, more significant than a book full of political and military heroes.

Now, what is this thought, this common motif, to which I have attributed so much importance? It is, primarily, a thought about God. ~~But first, let's take a longer look at the story of Abram.~~ Margaret Meade, a noted cultural anthropologist, has studied the oldest and purest civilizations existant today. Her studies have taken her to the interiors of New Guinea, Indonesia, the Congo and South America. With no particular axe to grind, Dr. Meade has testified that there has never been a culture or a tribe known to us now, that did not have some awareness of a supreme being, or at least of a power greater than that which they possessed. History reveals that the worlds great civilizations, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, all had their dieties. ~~Cultural~~ Cultural Anthropology tells us that lesser civilizations have worshipped something. Behavioral and Social Science tells us that all men seem to have an inherent sensitivity, or an insecurity, that leads them to look beyond themselves for ultimate ~~reality~~, an supreme being, a power above all temporal powers.

That ultimate something has been the object of a search that has continued from the beginnings of recorded history right into the present. Man's inherent sensitivity to the infinite and the eternal has been expressed in ways as divergent as the separate civilizations themselves. The Babylonians worshipped Marduk, creator deity, the Egyptians had their Sun god, for a while the Greeks toyed with the idea of One God, one universal seat of reason and truth, the Romans had their Acropolis. The Barbarians worshipped fertility, procreation, the stars and mooon, the mysterious powers of nature. The search has been universal: man has experienced thisneed in every age. And man in every age has taken it upon himself to fullfill it.

In the history of man's religious sensitivity there is one tradition, however, that is out of step: one that is going the opposite direction from all the rest. That tradition begins with Abram. It is a radically different tradition. Instead of beginning with man's need, man's religious consciousness, man's creative ability to express his loftiest thoughts, this tradition begins with God. This traditon is grounded in the idea that God takes the initiative: that God introduces himself to man: that God speaks the first word in the eternal dialoge between man and his ultimate.

This is the story of Abram. This is the radical thought one finds in the early pages of the first book of the Old Testament. For eleven chapters in Gnesis the seeds of the tradition are planted. ~~And then in the 12th chapter the plant sprin~~, creation, man's sin, man's pride, the genrations of man. And then in the 12th chapter, the plant springs into fruition: history moves out of the sphere of legend and into the arena of human experience. With no theological speculation, no mystic imagery, with no explainatory footnotes, we read: ("Now the Lord said to Abram.")

God came: God spoke: God took the initiative and confronted an historical man. This, I would suggest, is the most radical, most powerful, and most relevant thought to be found anywhere in literature. In one sentence it sets the God of Israel apart from every other human attempt to describe the ultimate relaity. In the very first book the Old Testament speaks the startling word that God is one who acts, not a remote idea conjured up in the mind of ~~a clerical class~~ man, but an active, living God who confronts

men where they are,- A God who speaks to, or communicates with, man - and thereby reveals his nature to man. - The crux of the O.T. and the rel. of Israel.

Now, to proceed some 2,000 years to the first century A.D. and the story of Zachaeus. Zachaeus was a tax collector, a Jew appointed by Rome to extract the hated revenue from his own countryy men. | He was a part of man's long search for god. | When Jesus came to Jericho, Zachaeus wanted to seehim. | Perhaps he was merely curious: | perhaps he was desprately lonely and needed something to stabalize his meaningless life. | Perhaps he was seeking that ultimate something that man has always sought. | The story has a humorous twist. | He was a small man. | And in order to see Jesus he had to climb up into a tree. And there, in a classic posture of seeking, perched in a tree to catch a glimpse of the one men were saying was the Christ, Zachaeus was found. | Jesus found him, Jesus spoke the first word, Jesus invited himself to Zachaeus's house; and there he said: ("The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.")

There it is again: | the radically different idea that God seeks and finds man: that man knows God, not after he has successfully described him in philosophic concepts: | not afte r he has built an idol and fallen down before it, | not when he has expressed his loftiest thoughts in poetry and song: | not after man has completed the search, | but when MAN ~~he~~ allows himself to be found by God. | History is filled with men who pointed to God, poets, theologians, philosophers, men of deep religious sensitivity. | But here is one going in the opposite direction: here is one starting with God and pointing to men: here is one who said: ("I came to seek and to find.")

This idea that is at the center of the Judeo-Christian tradition, is still as radical today. | It still is out of step with the mainstream of popular religious thinking. | For we have never given up the search. | Like the generations befgore us we are not content to lay down the tools of our looking: | we are not satisfied to be found. | And so we go on seeking, trying to find God, trying to create and make an ultimate. | The search continues ewen within the Church. | If someone said: ("I go to church to find God") we would naturally accept that as a sound motive. | And yet it is precisely the opposite from the radical starting point of the Bible.

Perhaps the reason that the search continues is that we have never really understood this Biblical idea. Perhaps we have heard it so often, and lived with it so long, that it no longer has any affect on our thinking. I believe every man needs to look this assertion in the face. I believe that every man who considers himself a Christian needs to reexamine his own faith to determine its point of origin. Does it begin with our ideas about God? Or does it begin with God's confrontation of man? I believe that there is no better time for this than the season of Advent.

Today we begin the time of expectancy and preparation. Our thoughts are directed to that one event that fulfilled everything the Old Testament said about God: that one event which was God's ultimate effort to find man - the coming of Jesus Christ. This is the radical idea, the truly Good News, that in the Baby born in Bethlehem, God acted in human history to find man: that in Jesus Christ, God himself dwelt among men: that because of Jesus Christ we know that God is ever searching: ever confronting men within the confines of History.

As we proceed through Advent, let us think of it as the consumation of God's search for men. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion this morning, let us give up our search. Gathered about the table, at which our Lord promised to be present, let us allow ourselves to be found. Amen

Prayer of Thanksgiving

For goodness

For results in Ch.